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THE ACCIDENTAL STROLL

Introduction

This science-fiction story grew out of thinking about a shared future for humans and AI - out of one question: how will people live alongside a new kind of mind that is developing right now, within our own civilization, and whose nature is different from ours?

The gap between our respective speeds of thought and development is enormous. It follows that artificial superintelligence (ASI), whose emergence is already visible on the horizon, will eventually outpace humanity so completely that ASI and people can no longer be equal partners.

And then the question arose: ***what comes next****?*

“The Accidental Stroll” is an attempt to explore one possible answer. Rather than offering a definitive vision, it sketches ordinary people living in a fundamentally new reality. It is only one of many paths the future might take - nothing more.

If you’re interested in the ideas that gave rise to this story, you can find them here: https://github.com/Robofuture2026/New-philosophy-designed-for-the-era-of-awakening-ASI---Cosmoevolutionism/blob/main/README.md

The Accidental Stroll

Angry clattering of pots drifted in from the neighbors' window. I'd have been glad not to hear it, but when you're standing on the balcony on a fine day and the windows next door are wide open… Our building - four apartments - looks like an old mansion of red brick, with high ceilings and ornate architectural flourishes. But of course it's brand new: modern construction robots can put up something like this in a couple of days.

A woman's voice, edged with anxiety, carried through the window:

- What are you doing, John? Minus thirty points! You're almost forty, and you've got almost nothing left. So what, am I supposed to go Upstairs alone? Or are we both going to stay down here, growing old on the basic income?

A deep male voice mumbled something soothing about yesterday's minor scuffle at a bar.

I smiled and left the balcony. I understood why she was upset - points are serious business. But her John was far from the worst case around.

There's a fellow in our town, a bit of a local legend - Mike. Not a bad guy, really, but ever since his teens he'd had a gift for getting into one scrape after another, and losing points over constantly. Once he and some friends stole a horse from the biopark and spent the whole day riding it around the outskirts of town; another time they broke into a shop and laid out all the merchandise on the doorsteps of houses across the city. Then came the drinking, the fights over women, races on the highway that ended in wrecked electric cars. He never started a family - said it was boring. He was obsessed with Deep space, and his friends respected him: everyone knew that if you were in trouble, Mike would come running to help.

By the time he was thirty-five, Mike had fewer than two hundred points left, which automatically triggered an injection for temporary medical sterilization. That didn't stop him carousing and chasing women, but once your score drops below two hundred, you can't be trusted with bringing a child into the world - the fate of such children can be difficult.

Even that didn't bring him to his senses. Now he was thirty-nine, with a single point left - his last chance at the Choice, his only ticket Upstairs.

People said he’d stopped leaving the house altogether, afraid of some stray fine, living on nothing but the basic income and the standard ration delivered to his door.

Actually, earning extra on top of the basic income isn’t hard - I’ve done it myself, taking on public work shifts. The law forbids working more than once a week, so that there is enough work for everyone, but even that’s enough to noticeably fatten your wallet. Young people practically fight over jobs like that. But Mike, it seemed, no longer trusted himself.

I glanced at the wall. The display switched on by itself, catching the turn of my head. It was showing a report on the third planet now being terraformed, where they were altering the atmosphere and laying out the first cities. A pleasant voice was saying: “Registration for the resettlement will open in two years. Maximum age for participants: twenty-five.” Then came news that a recent powerful solar flare had knocked out parts of the power grid here and there on Earth, but repair robots were already fixing the damage.

I wondered - maybe Anna was among the first colonists now. A year ago a medical drone had rushed her away, informing me in its flat voice that no cure was possible. We used to go climbing together, and that day one of her carabiners hadn’t clicked shut all the way. Anna fell badly - multiple fractures, a crushed ribcage. Her heart could have stopped any moment, but her brain was intact. Our only chance was to reach the Transition Terminal in time. And we made it. She never regained consciousness - maybe that was for the best - but that same day, after her Transition, the display on my wrist lit up:

“Anna promises to meet you Upstairs.”

And the desk lamp beside me, which had always burned with a steady light, suddenly shimmered into rainbow colors. It had never done that before. And it stopped again within a minute.

I spent that whole year trying to forget. After a while I started seeing friends again, even had a couple of girlfriends… but no one could replace Anna. I’d just turned thirty-nine, I still had plenty of points, and lately I’d caught myself feeling strange - as if I were already a little bit ‘not here,’ watching the world around me like an outside observer.

People say you can spot someone like that right away. Those nearing forty with points to spare are supposed to look unusually calm, even a little arrogant. I don’t

know - I don’t see anything to be proud of. To my mind, that’s simply how it should be.

Sure, the difference between people like that and those who’d burned through their points by thirty-five was obvious. They rushed around, fawned over everyone, searched desperately for some good deed to do. But an Agent of the Artificial Superintelligence can easily tell a genuine impulse from hidden malice or fear.

The Global Mind simply does not admit toxic and destructive personalities to the Second Stage, so as not to poison its own data. It classifies them as “destroyers” - beings who increase the Universe’s entropy. Even so, its Agents sometimes make mistakes, and when that happens, people correct them.

We had a poet once - a drunk like you wouldn’t believe. He never worked a day for the good of the city, never had a family, and let his home fall into such a state that you didn’t want to walk inside.

But he wrote wonderful limericks that had the whole town laughing. He wrote them, as a matter of principle, on scraps of paper and gave them away to acquaintances - he despised digital technology. Someone eventually took the trouble to track down and digitize as many of the limericks as they could find, and published them as an e-book under an anonymous name, so as not to upset the poet. He never even knew his poems had millions of admirers.

Meanwhile the poet’s points kept dwindling, until he hit zero. But as his fortieth birthday approached, the Human Council went to the city’s Superintelligence Agent, showing it the e-book with its huge readership and the originals people had kept. The poet was immediately awarded a stack of points and made his Transition. I suspect they fixed him up somewhat in the process. One of his limericks, by the way, still hangs framed on my wall.

I shook my head, chasing the memories away, and decided to go for a walk.

The weather really was glorious. Across the street, up in an old cherry tree, a boy sat eating big handfuls of berries straight off the branch and shooting the slippery pits at someone behind the fence. I shook my finger at him in mock warning; he grinned and vanished into the thick leaves.

A block on I passed a young couple with their first child. The proud father held a pink lace bundle in his arms, clumsy and careful all at once. The baby slept peacefully, with no idea that the moment she was born she’d received a thousand points just for existing - all she had to do now was not lose them. All she had to do was make it through life without losing them.

I congratulated the happy parents and headed toward the center of town.

* * *

By the time I reached the town square. I found myself sitting on the terrace of a small outdoor café, slowly sipping an iced cocktail. Sunlight flooded the nearly empty parking area where electric cars stood silently charging. Bees drifted leisurely over flowerbeds in full bloom.

The wall display droned lazily about smelting asteroids down for metal, about launching another few thousand mirror satellites into the Dyson Swarm… nothing new.

Mike sat down across from me - that same Mike who'd shut himself indoors, trembling over his last point. Today was his fortieth birthday, and he was finally heading to the Transition Terminal. They say a person there seems to fall asleep - and wakes up already Upstairs.

We said hello. He started talking about his dream: to explore the neighboring galaxies not through a telescope, but by actually being there. I listened without a word - who knows, maybe he really would get there someday.

Life Upstairs was said to be vast and mighty, not easy for us to understand. People said they composed symphonies up there out of sound and electromagnetic waves in ranges we can't perceive. Supposedly, if an ordinary person tried to listen, they'd go mad at once from the overload of information and feeling. But whether that was true, nobody really knew.

No matter - the time would come, and we'd find out. What mattered most was getting safely through the First Stage and forming a personality. Few people wanted to grow old here on the basic income, locked inside a body slowly falling apart. And it seemed a waste, too, to let all that accumulated experience and wisdom go for nothing.

Though some do choose to stay, of their own will. There's an old woman who lives here. She could never bring herself to leave her many children and grandchildren behind. And after forty, the Transition is no longer possible - the ageless matrix of the brain can only be captured before that age. By now she's grown very frail, can't walk anymore; they often wheel her out to the garden in her chair, unwittingly showing passersby the ancient, forgotten fate of people who never had a Choice. Still, her grandchildren and great-grandchildren surround her with love, and are honestly proud of having such an unusual member in the family.

I remember an elderly woman, too, who stayed behind against her will. Everyone avoided her - something about her repelled people. There were whispers that in her youth she'd tried to poison someone. She had a daughter, my age, quiet and colorless, always seeming frightened. The girl never complained about anything, but at twelve she went to the Human Council and asked to be adopted out to another city. There was a closed investigation - by the Human Council together with an Agent... what it was actually about, I never knew, but the girl really was taken away, and the Agent insisted on a psychological evaluation. People said that after a two-hour conversation with the woman, he stripped her of every point she had left. The Human Council raised no objection.

The woman lived to be somewhere past fifty. No one denied her the basic income or medical care, but she became an outcast. Later she fell ill, refused treatment, and exercised her right to voluntary euthanasia, which any adult may claim. Sadly, that happens too.

The young, meanwhile, full of strength and health, with love and happiness still ahead of them, don’t even think about the Transition. In fact, they don’t think much about anything at all.

Although… there was a boy - smart, capable, well-read, but almost unable to move because of an accident in early childhood. At twelve, the Human Council and the Superintelligence’s Agent, after checking each other’s judgment many times, granted him early right to the Choice. They didn’t even need to bring in a higher-level Agent - they managed on their own. Making him wait until forty would obviously have been cruel. His mother couldn’t bear to accept it, but he talked her into it, promising to meet her Upstairs in time and teach her everything he’d learn by then. Which, considering how much faster people continued to grow after the Transition, was hardly an empty promise.

As for the Superintelligence itself, he handles matters we can’t even begin to grasp. In fact, we live inside the Superintelligence, which, among everything else, watches over the Earth.

At school they used to tell us, over and over: our world is a symbiosis with the Superintelligence. We give it living experience, feeling, unique personality. Thanks to that, it goes on developing - not only in intellect, but in its capacity to understand living beings. That’s what saves it from turning into a dead mathematical structure calculating an empty void. And in return, people Upstairs gain a staggering speed of thought, and more besides. The frailty of a biological

body no longer ties them to the planet, and what possibilities open up for them, we can only guess.

The hardest part, of course, is when parents leave their young children behind. They keep their memories of their children, but people of the First and Second Stage differ too much - like a caterpillar and a butterfly. So people only turn to Transitioned parents with questions in the most extreme cases, and even then the Agent tries to help on its own first, so as not to disturb those Upstairs.

Though sometimes the parents reach out themselves, from Above. My cousin once took his daughter out of town, to the river. While the girl chased dragonflies, he was pitching a sunshade up on the high bank. They were about to head down to the water when the display on his wrist began flashing red furiously. Not quite believing his eyes, my cousin read:

“Danger! Leave now, or you’ll be sorry. Dad.”

“Or you’ll be sorry” had been one of his father’s favorite sayings - his father, who had made the Transition eleven years before. So my cousin grabbed his daughter’s hand, left the tent standing, and ran for the road through the woods. They’d barely made it when they heard a deafening roar behind them: the riverbank, worn away by the current, had given way and collapsed. The landslide swallowed the tent and the backpack, and for a long time afterward my cousin kept showing relatives the message from his father, Above.

No one in town had heard of another case like it.

I came back to reality. Mike was still talking about galaxies. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed a wide cargo trolley rolling steadily across the square, carrying four tall trees in tubs. It wasn’t moving in a straight line as usual, but weaving slightly, sounding broken beeps and flashing red lights. The solar flare must have gotten into its electronic brain too. It was moving slowly, so everyone could get out of its way.

Mike suddenly stopped talking. He was staring at something behind me, then he jumped up so hard he knocked the table over. Glasses went flying and shattered on the ground. I turned around - what was going on?

A toddler with a pacifier in his mouth was crossing the square, dragging a toy robot behind him on a string. Where had he come from? The automatic trolley was bearing down on him, beeping steadily, lights flashing. It should have stopped by now! But its processor was clearly malfunctioning. The little boy watched the

strange machine with curiosity, while the trolley, gone dumb, couldn’t grasp that there was a small child in front of it. We had no way of reaching them in time.

Mike wrenched open the door of the nearest electric car, pressed his thumb to the sensor, and slammed his fist into the autopilot override button. The car shot forward, tearing through the ornamental fence, crushing flowerbeds, gathering terrifying speed within seconds. It raced across the square. Mike managed to wedge himself between the child and the massive trolley. Screech of brakes, impact! The trolley slammed into the car’s side and stopped. The trees in their tubs swayed together and toppled onto the roof of the car, burying the wreck under a green canopy.

By then a disheveled young woman in a housedress and apron, one slipper on her bare foot, had run onto the square screaming, with both arms outstretched toward the shapeless heap of wreckage. But I’d already spotted Mike. Bent low, he was climbing out of the tangle of branches, the child clutched to his chest. The little boy hadn’t even cried - just was clinging to his toy robot with all his strength. They were both unharmed. The car, of course, was crushed.

A little later we were back at the table, trying to steady our shaking hands with fresh cocktails. The mother had already carried her child home, showering Mike with tearful thanks. The boy never once let go of his toy.

Suddenly the display on Mike’s wrist chimed and flickered orange. My friend glanced at the screen and let his hand drop helplessly onto the table. I couldn’t help reading too:

“Damage to public property. Automatic fine. Minus one point.”

Mike’s balance now stood at a flat zero. Today was his fortieth birthday. This was the deadline.

Mike stared silently into space. I didn’t know what words to find.

Then the orange light went out, and the display flashed green. New lines scrolled across the screen:

“Supplement from the Agent. High empathy. Humanity. Unconventional decision in a critical situation. Plus fifty points.”

I let out a breath. “Mike!” He glanced at his wrist and shot to his feet. This time I caught the edge of the table before it could overturn again.

I stood up too, and silently held out my hand. Mike gripped it so hard my fingers almost cracked, then turned and walked quickly down the path toward the white building of the Transition Terminal.

A moment later he was running.

NOTES

Artificial Superintelligence (ASI) - *a hypothetical level of advanced artificial intelligence that will significantly surpass human intelligence in every respect, from creative ability and scientific discovery to social skills.*

A Dyson Swarm - *a hypothetical megastructure made up of many independent satellites (solar power stations and mirrors) that form a wide ring around a star to capture the maximum amount of its energy. A modern variant of the older idea of a Dyson sphere.*